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Ways to Help Children with Autism Develop Language

Here are 15 tips for encouraging young children with autism to imitate and use words and sounds. (These suggestions are also great for any young child, with or without autism!)

IMITATING SOUNDS AND WORDS

GROOMING AND HYGIENE

Brushing teeth and hair and washing hands and face provide many opportunities for imitation. Model the actions needed while saying important key words, such as “Brush-brush-brush.”

MEALTIME/SNACK TIME

Use sounds and words to describe the food. When preparing and cleaning up, provide opportunities for the child to imitate stirring, rinsing plastic dishes, and wiping off the table. Model the corresponding words.

BOOK TIME

Use gestures to represent actions and concepts in the pictures. Model making sounds and saying words that correspond to the pictures such as “Mmm!” and “Eat” for pictures of food.

COMMUNITY OUTINGS

As you approach the automatic doors at the grocery store, library, or post office, say “open” and model signing open. If the child does not say the word, assist him or her to make the sign.

HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES

Tell the child what you will be doing and model corresponding environmental sounds, actions, and words. When getting ready to vacuum, say “Time to vacuum,” make the whirring sound of a vacuum, and pretend to push a vacuum before turning it on.

PLAYTIME

Model actions and their corresponding sounds and words, such as shaking, pushing, flying, filling, dumping, and sweeping.

BATH TIME

When playing with tub toys, model sounds such as “b-b-b-b” for a boat, and words such as “quack-quack” for a duck. Wave and say “hi” and “bye” to toys when putting them in the tub and putting them away.

BEDTIME

Pat the child’s stuffed animals and tell them “Night-night.” Help the child to do the same. Put your fingers to your lips and say “Shhh” or “Night-night” to the child.

USING WORDS

GROOMING AND HYGIENE

When brushing the child’s hair or teeth, sing a song and pause for the child to fill in words, such as “This is the way we brush your _____.” Ask “Now what?” when the child knows what comes next.

MEALTIME/SNACK TIME

Give choices of food and drink for the child to select. Playfully sabotage situations such as giving ice cream but not a spoon to a child who typically uses a spoon. If the child does not request a spoon, ask the child “What do you need?” Give the child small portions so he or she must ask for more.

BOOK TIME

For some pictures, ask the child questions that are appropriate for his or her level of language comprehension. For example, begin with “What’s that?” and “Who’s that?” to target nouns, and when those are mastered, progress to “What is he doing?” to target actions with –ing endings.

COMMUNITY OUTINGS

Set up opportunities for the child to make requests, such as “up” to get in the car, “out” to get out of the shopping cart, and “more” to be pushed again on the swing.

HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES

Ask the child if he or she wants to help with household activities such as watering plants or rinsing dishes. When the child is helping, make comments about what he or she is doing and ask relevant questions.

BATH TIME

To facilitate requesting, set up situations so desired bath items are outside the child’s reach. Vary word models to target requesting and commenting (e.g., when the child wants the duck, say, “You want the duck. Say ‘duck,’” and after the child has the duck, say, “You have the duck. Say ‘duck.’”).

BEDTIME

Encourage the child to use a variety of words: requesting a stuffed animal on the shelf, naming a book to read, and choosing pajamas to wear.



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